



PROJECT MUSE®

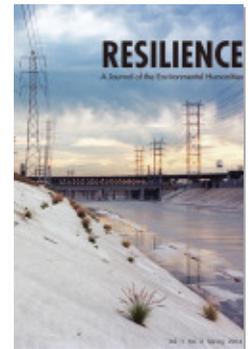
---

*Sowing Change: The Making of Urban Agriculture in Havana* by  
Adriana Premat (review)

Zachary Nowak

*Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, Volume 1, Number  
2, Spring 2014, (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/565708>

**Adriana Premat, *Sowing Change: The Making of Urban Agriculture in Havana* (Nashville TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012)**

The decline in productivity of conventional agriculture in Cuba after the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the island's consequent shift towards a more decentralized, organic, and urban agriculture has captured the imagination of proponents of alternatives for agribusiness as usual. Books such as Fernando Funes, Luis Garcia, Martin Bourque, Nilda Perez, and Peter Rosset's *Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance* and Peter Rosset and Medea Benjamin's *The Greening of the Revolution*—as well as numerous documentary film projects—narrate the story of an authoritarian state forced to change its ways accompanied by an almost heroic popular effort by the Cuban people to produce food in every nook and cranny available. Although they vary in approach, these representations of the dramatic expansion of food provisioning in urban areas of Cuba have privileged the state as the principal actor and enabler of this revolution. Adriana Premat's new book, *Sowing Change: The Making of Urban Agriculture in Havana*, suggests that although the Cuban state is one of the agents of change, it is far from monolithic in seeking to shape urban agriculture. Indeed Premat shows that the making of the island's horticultural spaces (in the sense of their discursive and physical construction) is the result of the sometimes parallel, sometimes conflicting actions of various state actors, international NGOs, and the producers themselves.

Premat's findings are based on almost a decade of travel to the island, and draw from extensive ethnographic work among primary producers and representatives from the state (primarily from MINAG, the Ministry of Agriculture), as well as archival research. Unlike most previous work on Cuban urban agriculture, Premat portrays the producers neither as loyal citizens carrying out the original intent of the *revolución*, nor as dissidents engaged in a wholly counter-hegemonic struggle. Premat's intimate portraits of Cuba's horticultural avant-garde reveals that while they are painfully aware of the need to compromise with ever-changing and often contradictory state projects, their primary objective is often much more mundane: food provisioning in difficult times.

*Sowing Change* briefly reviews the difficulties of Cuban agriculture in the immediate post-Soviet era (when fossil fuels and synthetic fertilizers and pesticides were suddenly unavailable) and explains the various sites that emerged for urban agriculture: the *patio* (private property converted to food production), the *parcela* (state property given in usufruct to private citizens), and the *organopónico* (larger gardens on public land). Agriculture in Cuba prior to 1989 fit the model that James Scott has outlined of a centralized state-run project that relies on globalized solutions and blind faith in technology. The state-held control over food production in Cuba—a monopoly ostensibly necessary to create a more egalitarian society—but this same lever of control was also, as

Premat points out, its Achilles' heel. The state's inability to provide sufficient food for all Cubans forced it to open the Pandora's box of delocalized production to survive the Special Period. The partial shift to the populace engaging in self-provisioning was carefully framed by the government not as a dramatic break with the past, but rather as a continuation of revolutionary ideals. Premat draws on a wide variety of sources—newspapers, radio broadcasts, and official speeches—that used military language (such as gardens as “the trenches” and gardeners as “troops” in a “people's war” to produce food) but shifted the imagined community from the *pueblo* (people) to the *barrio* (neighborhood). Despite the incorporation of the urban agriculture movement into official state policy, Premat reveals that this policy was anything but uniformly accepted. Although Raúl Castro was one of the main proponents of the move towards self-provisioning, there were intense debates—between the armed forces, the MINAG, and the agencies responsible for urban planning and the renovation of Havana for tourism—about the control of space and its conflicting aesthetic and agricultural (not to mention public versus private) use.

Some of the book's most important conclusions come from chapters that shift attention from the state to the actual producers. Premat carefully shows that far from being at the avant-garde (of the party, of technology, or of the state's priorities), many *parceleros* are rather quite marginalized. Indeed, they are engaging in self-provisioning precisely because they are excluded (by the dearth of public and private transport, if by nothing else) from the most dynamic sectors of Cuba's mixed economy. Although *patio* owners are more autonomous, those that tend *parcelas* on state property are wary of the vagaries of state planning that might at any moment annul their rights to their gardens.

Indeed, as Cuba emerged from the worst of the Special Period and the economy began to recover, the state began to rein in the independence that its promotion of the urban agricultural movement had generated. *Parceleros* using what had previously been public land and community discussion of land use outside of the normal channels of power had sparked a debate about the control of space—but also, implicitly, about vertical hierarchies and their desirability. Premat traces the attempt of the state to domesticate urban agriculturalists through competitions designed to bring them back into bureaucratic view, as well as discursive work that emphasized the role of the state in the movement (editing out individual initiative) and the communitarian—not private—objectives of gardens.

Although she acknowledges the space created in and by the gardens to promote counter-hegemonic thinking and action, Premat's biggest contribution to the literature on Cuban agriculture is her examination of how producers use the state's language to assert their continued control over garden plots. As the state shifted discourse from gardens as survival to gardens as communitarian areas, *parceleros* responded by emphasizing common goods at the neighbor-

hood level while linking green spaces to the revolutionary struggle. At the same time it is apparent from Premat's discussions with producers that the genie is out of the bottle: "The overall consensus among *parceleros* appeared to be that private citizens, rather than state employees, knew best and had proven themselves to be the ideal caretakers of public land. This underlying critique of state control and management extended also to producers' assessment of the state's involvement in food production."<sup>1</sup>

Premat's account is also unique in its attention to the role of international NGOs in the power dynamics of Cuban urban agriculture. Premat observes that because many NGOs want to avoid working with the Cuban government, the government itself must also leave room in the official narrative for the *parcelas* and *patios* as loci of small-scale, locally coordinated effort. The NGOs and other foreigners who document urban gardening's achievements in Cuba also have a strong motivation to present a romanticized view of the power of the people and of communal action, often framed as a successful alternative (and, implicitly, replicable elsewhere) to fossil fuel-based, capitalist agribusiness. Small-scale Cuban producers are very much aware of international funding and their self-narratives thus correspond to what they perceive NGOs want to hear. This narrative process introduces NGOs as actors in the construction of the discourse about urban agriculture in Cuba—one that acts from afar but is nonetheless an important influence on both the producer and the Cuban state.

Premat's premise—that urban agriculture "constitute[s] fertile grounds for exploring the shifting power landscapes in Cuba and the ongoing reconfiguration of the socialist project"—is validated, in that these sites do not exist outside of power but are rather entangled in complex discursive webs that stretch far beyond the island itself.<sup>2</sup> While many prior accounts have focused on the state's efforts to promote urban agriculture, Premat has highlighted its non-enabling acts, and the internal, official disagreement on the place of urban agriculture in Cuba's future. In addition she has given the first full portrait of the urban gardeners themselves, illustrating how they both contradict the official narrative and insinuate their own objectives. The book is an important contribution not only to the understanding of urban agriculture in Cuba, but also to the larger debate about the inability of a state, even an authoritarian one, to completely control discourse in a truly global world.

Zachary Nowak

#### NOTES

1. Adriana Premat, *Sowing Change: The Making of Urban Agriculture in Havana* (Nashville TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012), 76.

2. Premat, *Sowing Change*, iii.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Zachary Nowak is a graduate student in the doctoral program in American studies at Harvard University. He is also the assistant director of the Food Studies Program at the Umbra Institute in Perugia, Italy. His research interests center the connection of space and place in food. Nowak is writing his first book, *Truffle: A Global History*, for Reaktion's Edible series. He has translated *Why Architects Still Draw* for MIT Press.*